

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease (R2)

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

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Background: FWP proposes to implement a cooperative grazing system involving selected pastures on the Spotted Dog WMA and adjoining McQueary Ranch. This proposal would provide yearlong rest from cattle grazing on 1,400-1,500 acres of a 2,100-acre pasture system—on a rotational basis—on the McQueary Ranch. In effect, this would reserve all the annual forage production on those rested private lands for elk to use in the winter. This would effectively expand the managed footprint of the WMA to include a defined portion of neighboring private land for elk. In return, cattle from the McQueary Ranch would graze one of four pastures annually, involving up to 240 animal unit months (AUMs) on 600-750 acres of the WMA. The four pastures on the WMA are contained within a 2,800-acre perimeter, involving about 8 percent of the WMA. The WMA grazing lease area would be located above elk winter range in transitional habitat where cattle grazing could enhance springtime forage attractiveness for elk. One WMA pasture would be grazed annually in June-July on a four-year rotation and would be rested yearlong from cattle in the intervening three years. This rest-dominated application of a rest-rotation grazing strategy on the WMA would allow grasslands and riparian areas to continue improving within the 2,800-acre treated landscape (Hansen, personal communication).

Public Involvement Process & Results: A draft environmental assessment (EA) was released for public comment for 30 days from February to March 2019. The EA was posted on FWP's website and comments could be made directly on the EA's webpage or submitted via mail or email. Legal notices were published once each in four local, regional, and statewide newspapers, and a statewide news release was distributed. FWP mailed 129 printed copies of the EA and 141 emails of its availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies. FWP received 31 comments during the public review period: 17 from individuals and 14 from groups (sportsmen, wildlife, stockgrowers, and land use). Supporters for the proposal included seven individuals and six groups, opponents of the proposal included nine individuals and five groups, and four (one individual, three groups) did not clearly indicate support or opposition.

Alternatives and Analysis: The only workable alternative is no action, which would forego this opportunity to work in cooperation with a neighboring ranch to help resolve wildlife habitat resource issues.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve this proposal. FWP worked with the McQueary Ranch under the commission's longstanding guidance embodied in ARM 12.9.510: *(1) The commission intends Habitat Montana to deliver the following services and benefits: (a) conserve and enhance land, water and wildlife; (b) contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities; (c) provide incentives for habitat conservation on private land; (d) contribute to non-hunting recreation; (e) protect open space and scenic areas; (f) promote habitat-friendly agriculture; and (g) maintain the local tax base, through payments in lieu of taxes for real estate, while demonstrating that productive wildlife habitat is compatible with agriculture and other land uses.* FWP has carefully addressed public comments in its Decision Notice, which will be made available to all commenters and the general public two weeks prior to the April commission meeting.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's proposed six-year cooperative grazing lease with the McQueary Ranch on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.